

Hon. Charles Sumner

with compliments of

L. M. Seward

1870

SPEECH OF

MR. SEWARD, AT SITKA,

AUGUST 12TH, 1869.

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APRIL 11, 1860

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SPEECH OF MR. SEWARD AT SITKA, AUG. 12th, 1869.

Citizens of Alaska, Fellow Citizens of the United States:—

You have pressed me to meet you in public assembly once before I leave Alaska. It would be sheer affectation to pretend to doubt your sincerity in making this request and capriciously ungrateful to refuse it, after having received so many and varied hospitalities from all sorts and conditions of men. It is not an easy task, however, to speak in a manner worthy of your consideration, while I am living constantly on ship-board, as you all know, and am occupied intently in searching out whatever is sublime or beautiful or peculiar or useful. On the other hand it is altogether natural on your part to say, "You have looked upon Alaska, what do you think of it?" Unhappily I have seen too little of Alaska to answer the question satisfactorily. The entire coast line of the United States, exclusive of Alaska, is 10,000 miles, while the coast line of Alaska alone, including the islands, is 26,000 miles. The portion of the Territory which lies east of the peninsula, including islands, is 120 miles wide; the western portion including the Aleutian Islands expands to a breadth of 2300 miles. The entire land area including islands is 577,390 statute square miles. We should think a foreigner very presumptuous who should presume to give the world an opinion of the whole of the United States of America, after he had merely looked in from his steamer at Plymouth and Boston Harbor, or had run up the Hudson River to the Highlands, or had ascended the Delaware to Trenton, or the James River to Richmond, or the Mississippi no farther than Memphis. My observation of Alaska thus far has hardly been more comprehensive. I entered the Territory at the Portland Canal, made my way through the narrow passages of the Prince of Wales Archipelago, thence through Peril and Chatham Straits and Lynn Channel and up the Ohlscat River to the base of Fairweather, from which latter place I have returned through Clarence Straits to sojourn a few days at your beautiful bay under the shadows of the Baranof Hills and Mount Edgemoor. Limited, however, as my opportunities have been, I will, without further apology, give you the impressions I have received.

Of course I speak first of the skies of Alaska. It seems to be assumed in the case of Alaska that a country which extends through 58 degrees of longitude, and embraces portions as well of the Arctic as of the Temperate Zone, unlike all other regions so situated has not several climates, but only one. The weather of this one broad climate of Alaska is severely criticised in outside circles for being too wet and too cold. Nevertheless it must be fastidious person who complains of climates in which while the eagle soars to soar, the humming bird does not disdain to flutter. I shall speak only of the particular climate here which I know. My visit here happened to fall within the month of August. Not only have the skies been sumptuously bright and serene to give me a perfect view under the 50th parallel, of the total eclipse of the sun and of the evening star at the time of the sun's obscuration, but I have also enjoyed more clear than there have been cloudy days and in the early morning and in the late evenings peculiar to the season, I have lost myself in admiration of skies adorned with sapphires and gold as rich as those which are reflected by the Mediterranean. Of all the moonlights in the world commend me to those which light up the Archipelago of the North Pacific Ocean. Fogs have sometimes detained me longer on the Hudson and on Long Island Sound than now on the waters of the North Pacific. In saying this I do not mean to say that rain and fog are unfrequent here. The Russian pilot George, whom you all know, expressed my conviction on this matter exactly when he said to me, "Oh, yes, Mr.

Seward, we do have changeable weather here sometimes as they do in the other States." I might amend the expression by adding the weather here is only a little more changeable. It must be confessed at least that it is an horrid climate, for it makes no pretensions to constancy. If, however, you have fewer bright sunrises and glowing sunsets than Southern latitudes enjoy, you are favored on the other hand with more frequent and more magnificent displays of the aurora and the rainbow. The thermometer tells the whole case when it reports that the summer is colder and the winter is warmer in Alaska than in New York and Washington. It results from the nature of such a climate that the earth prefers to support the fir, the spruce, the pine, the hemlock and other evergreens, rather than deciduous trees, and to furnish grasses and esculent roots, rather than the cereals of drier and hotter climates. I have mingled freely with the multifarious population, the Tongass, the Stickeen, the Chukchee, the Hydahs, the Sitkas, the Kootznooks and the Chilcats, as well as with the traders, the soldiers, the seamen and the settlers of various nationalities, English, Swedish, Russian and American, and I have seen all around me only persons enjoying robust and exuberant health. Manhood of every race and condition everywhere exhibits activity and energy, while infancy seems exempt from disease and age relieved from pain.

It is next in order to speak of the rivers and seas of Alaska. The rivers are broad, shallow and rapid, while the seas are deep but tranquil. Mr. Sumner, in his elaborate and magnificent oration, although he spoke only from historical accounts, has not exaggerated—no man can exaggerate—the marine treasures of the Territory. Besides the whale, which everywhere and at all times is seen enjoying his robust exercise, and the sea-otter, the fur-seal, the hair-seal and the walrus, found in the waters which embosom the western islands—those waters as well as the seas of the Eastern Archipelago are found teeming with the salmon, cod and other fishes adapted to the support of human and animal life. Indeed, what I have seen here has almost made me a convert to the theory of some naturalists that the waters of the globe are filled with stores for the sustenance of animal life surpassing the available productions of the land.

It must be remembered that the coast range of mountains which begins in Mexico is continued into the Territory and invades the seas of Alaska. Hence it is that in the islands and on the mainland, so far as I have explored it, we find ourselves everywhere in the immediate presence of black-hills or foothills as they are variously called, and that these foothills are overtopped by ridges of snow-capped mountains. These snow-capped mountains are manifestly of volcanic origin, and they have been subjected through an indefinite period to atmospheric abrasion and disintegration. Hence they have assumed all conceivable shapes and forms. In some places they are serrated into sharp, angular peaks, and in other places they appear architecturally arranged so as to present cloud-capped castles, towers, domes and minarets. The mountain sides are furrowed with deep and straight ravines down which the thawing fields of ice and snow are precipitated, generally in the month of May, with such a vehemence as to have produced in every valley immense level plains of intervale land. These plains as well as the sides of the mountains almost to the summits are covered with forests so dense and dark as to be impenetrable except to wild beasts and savage hunters. On the lowest intervale land the cottonwood grows. It seems to be the species of poplar which is known in the Atlantic States as the Balm of Gilead, and which is dwarfed on the Rocky Mountains. Here it takes on such large dimensions that the Indian shapes out of a single trunk even his great war canoe which safely bears over the deepest waters a phalanx of sixty warriors. These imposing trees always appear to rise out of a jungle of elder, alder, crab-apple and other fruit-bearing shrubs and bushes. The short and slender birch which, sparsely scattered, marks the verge of vegetation in Labrador, has not yet been reached by the explorers of Alaska. The birch tree sometimes appears here upon the river side, upon the level next above the home of the cottonwood, and is generally found a comely and stately tree. The forests of Alaska, however, consist mainly neither of shrubs, nor of the birch, nor of the cottonwood, but as I have already intimated, of the pine, the cedar, the cypress, the spruce, the fir, the larch and the hemlock. These forests

begin almost at the water's edge, and they rise with regular gradation to a height of 2000 feet. The trees nowhere dwarfed or diminutive attain the highest dimensions in sunny exposures in the deeper canyons or gorges of the mountains. The cedar sometimes called the yellow cedar, and sometimes the fragrant cedar, was long ago imported into China as an ornamental wood and it now furnishes the majestic beams and pillars with which the richer and more ambitious native chief delights to construct his rude but spacious hall or palatial residence, and upon which he carves in rude symbolical imagery the heraldry of his tribe and achievements of his nation. No beam or pillar or spar or mast or plank is ever required in either the land or the naval architecture of any civilized state greater in length and width than the trees which can be hewn down on the coasts of the islands and rivers here, and conveyed directly thence by navigation. A few gardens, fields and meadows have been attempted by natives in some of the settlements, and by soldiers at the military posts with most encouraging results. Nor must we forget that the native grasses ripening late in a humid climate preserve their nutritive properties though exposed, while the climate is so mild that cattle and horses require but slight provision of shelter during the winter.

Such is the island and coast portion of Eastern Alaska. Klakautch, the Chilcat, who is known and feared by the Indians throughout the whole Territory and who is a very intelligent chief, informs me that beyond the mountain range which intervenes between the Chilcat and the Yukon Rivers you descend into a plain unbroken by hills or mountains, very fertile, in a genial climate, and, as far as he could learn, of boundless extent. We have similar information from those who have traversed the interior from the shore of the Portland Canal to the upper branches of the Yukon. We have reason, therefore, to believe that beyond the coast range of mountains in Alaska we shall find an extension of the rich and habitable valley lands of Oregon, Washington Territory and British Columbia.

After what I have already said I may excuse myself from expatiating on the animal productions of the forest. The elk and the deer are so plenty as to be undervalued for food or skins by natives as well as strangers. The bear of many families, black, grizzly and cinnamon, the mountain sheep, inestimable for his fleece, the wolf, the fox, the beaver, the otter, the mink, the raccoon, the marten, the ermine, the squirrel, grey, black, brown and flying, are among the land fur-bearing animals. The furs thus found here have been the chief element for more than a hundred years, of the profitable commerce of the Hudson's Bay Company, whose mere possessory privileges seem even at this late day too costly to find a ready purchaser. This fur trade, together with the sea fur trade within the Territory, were the sole basis alike of Russian commerce and empire on this continent. This commerce was so large and important as to induce the governments of Russia and China to build and maintain a town for carrying on its exchanges in Tartary on the border of the two empires. It is well understood that the supply of furs in Alaska has not diminished while the demand for them in China and elsewhere has immensely increased.

I fear that we must confess to a failure of ice as an element of territorial wealth, at least as far as this immediate region is concerned. I find that the Russian American Company, whose monopoly was abolished by the Treaty of Acquisition, depended for ice exclusively upon the small lake or natural pond which furnishes the power for your saw mill in this town, and that this dependence has now failed by reason of the increasing mildness of the winter. The California Ice Company are now trying the small lakes of Kodiak, and certainly I wish them success. I think it is not yet ascertained whether glacier ice is pure and practical for commerce. If it is, the world may be supplied from the glaciers which, suspended from the region of the clouds, stand forth, in the majesty of ever wasting and ever renewed translucent mountains upon the banks of the Stickeen and Chilcat Rivers, and the shores of Cross Sound.

Alaska has been as yet but imperfectly explored. But enough is known to assure us that it possesses treasures of what are called the baser ores, equal to those of any other region of the continent. We have Copper Island

and Copper River, so named as the places where the natives, before the period of the Russian discovery, had procured the pure metal from which they fabricated instruments of war and legendary shields. In regard to iron, the question seems to be not where it can be found but whether there is any place where it does not exist. Mr. Davidson, of the Coast Survey, invited me to go up to him at the station he had taken up the Chilcat River, to make his observations of the eclipse, by writing me that he had discovered an iron mountain there. When I came there, I found that, very properly he had been studying the heavens so busily that he had but cursorily examined the earth under his feet: that it was not a single iron mountain he had discovered, but a range of hills, the very dust of which adheres to the magnet, while the range itself, 2000 feet high, extends along the east bank of the river, thirty miles. Limestone and marble crop out on the banks of the same river and in many other places. Coal beds, accessible to navigation, are found at Kootznoo. It is said, however, that the concentrated resin which the mineral contains, renders it too inflammable to be safely used by steamers. In any case it would seem calculated to supply the fuel requisite for the manufacture of iron. What seems to be excellent canal coal is also found in the Prince of Wales Archipelago. There are also mines at Cook's Inlet. Placer and quartz gold mining is pursued under many social disadvantages upon the Stickeen and elsewhere, with a degree of success which, while it does not warrant us in assigning a superiority in that respect to the Territory, does nevertheless warrant us in regarding gold mining as an established and reliable resource.

It would argue inexcusable insensibility if I should fail to speak of the scenery which, in the course of my voyage, has seemed to pass like a varied and magnificent panorama before me. The exhibition did not, indeed, open within the Territory. It broke upon me first when I had passed Cape Flattery and entered the Straits of Fuca, which separate British Columbia from Washington Territory. It widened as I passed along the shore of Puget Sound, expanded in the waters which divide Vancouver from the continent, and finally spread itself out into a magnificent Archipelago, stretching through the entire Gulf of Alaska and closing under the shade of Mount Fairweather and St. Elias. Nature has furnished to this majestic picture the only suitable border which could be conceived by lifting the coast range mountains to an exalted height and clothing them with eternal snows and crystalline glaciers.

It remains only to speak of man and of society in Alaska. Until the present moment the country has been exclusively inhabited and occupied by some thirty or more Indian tribes. I incline to doubt the popular classification of these tribes upon the assumption that they have descended from diverse races. Climate and other circumstances have indeed produced some differences of manners and customs between the Aleuts, the Koloschians, and the interior continental tribes. But all of them are manifestly of Mongol origin. Although they have preserved no common traditions, all alike indulge in fables, wear a physiognomy, and are imbued with sentiments peculiarly noticed in Japan and China. Savage communities, no less than civilized nations, require space for subsistence, whether they depend for it upon the land or upon the sea. In savage communities especially, an increase of population disproportioned to the supplies of the country occupied necessitates subdivision and remote colonization. Oppression and cruelty occur even more frequently among barbarians than among civilized men. Nor are ambition and faction less inherent in the one condition than in the other. From these causes it has happened that the 25,000 Indians in Alaska are found permanently divided into so many insignificant nations. These nations, jealous, ambitious and violent, could in no case exist long in the same region without mutually affording what, in every case, to each party seems just cause of war. War between savages becomes the private cause of the several families which are afflicted with the loss of their members. Such a war can never be composed until each family which has suffered receives an indemnity in blankets, adjusted according to an imaginary tariff, or in the failure of such compensation secures the death of one or more enemies as an atonement for the injury it has sustained. The enemy captured, whether by superior force or strategy,

either receives no quarter or submits for himself and his progeny to perpetual slavery. It has thus happened that the Indian tribes of Alaska have never either confederated or formed permanent alliances and that even at this late day, in the presence of superior power exercised by the United States Government they live in regard to each other in a state of enforced and doubtful truce. It is manifest that under these circumstances they must steadily decline in numbers and unhappily this decline is accelerated by their borrowing ruinous vices from the white man. Such as the natives of Alaska are they are nevertheless, in a practical sense the only laborers at present in the Territory. The white man comes amongst them from London, from St Petersburg, from Boston, from New York, from San Francisco, and from Victoria, not to fish (if we except along the whale-fishery), or to hunt, but simply to buy what fish and what peltries, ice, wood, lumber and coal the Indians have secured under the superintendence of temporary agents or factors. When we consider how greatly most of the tribes are reduced in numbers, and how precarious their vocations are, we shall cease to regard them as indolent or incapable, and on the contrary we shall more deeply regret than ever before, that a people so gifted by nature, so vigorous and energetic, and withal so docile and gentle in their intercourse with the white man, can neither be preserved as a distinct social community nor incorporated into our society. The Indian tribes will do here as they seem to have done in Washington Territory and British Columbia. They will merely serve the turn until civilized white men come.

You, the citizens of Sitka, are the pioneers, the advanced guard of the future population of Alaska, and you naturally ask when, from whence, and how soon reinforcements shall come, and what are the signs and guarantees of their coming? This question, with all its minute and searching interrogations, has been asked by the pioneers of every State and Territory of which the American Union is now composed, and the history of those States and Territories furnishes the complete, conclusive and satisfactory answer. Emigrants go to every infant state and Territory in obedience to the great natural law that obliges needy men to seek subsistence, and invites adventurous men to seek fortune, where it is most easily obtained, and this is always in the new and uncultivated regions. They go from every State and Territory, and from every foreign nation in America, Europe and Asia, because no established and populous state or nation can guarantee subsistence and fortune to all who demand them among its inhabitants.

The guarantees and signs of their coming to Alaska are found in the resources of the Territory, which I have attempted to describe, and in the condition of society in other parts of the world. Some men seek other climes for health and some for pleasure. Alaska invites the former class by a climate singularly salubrious and the latter class by scenery which surpasses in sublimity that of either the Alps, the Appenines, the Affagnanics or the Rocky Mountains. Emigrants from our own States, from Europe and from Asia will not be slow in finding out that fortunes are to be gained by pursuing here the occupations which have so successfully sustained races of untutored men. Civilization and refinement are making more rapid advances in our day than at any former period. The rising States and nations on this Continent, the European nations, and even those of Eastern Asia have exhausted or are exhausting their own forests and mines and are soon to become largely dependent upon those of the Pacific. The entire region of Oregon, Washington Territory, British Columbia and Alaska, seem thus destined to become a shipyard for the supply of all nations. I do not forget on this occasion that British Columbia belongs within a foreign jurisdiction. That circumstance does not materially affect my calculations. British Columbia, by whomsoever possessed, must be governed in conformity with the interests of her people and of society upon the American continent. If that territory shall be so governed there will be no ground of complaint anywhere. If it shall be governed so as to conflict with the interests of the inhabitants of that territory and of the United States, we all can easily foresee what will happen in that case. You will ask me, however, for guarantees that the hopes I encourage will not be postponed. I give them.

Within the period of my own recollection, I have seen twenty new States

added to the eighteen which before that time constituted the American Union, and I now see besides Alaska, ten territories in a forward condition of preparation for entering into the same great political family. I have seen in my own time not only the first electric telegraph, but even the first railroad and the first steamboat invented by man. And even on this present voyage of mine I have fallen in with the first steamboat, still afloat, that thirty-five years ago, lighted her fires on the Pacific Ocean. These, Citizens of Sitka, are the guarantees, not only that Alaska has a future, but that that future has already begun. I know that you want two things just now, when European monopoly is broken down and United States free trade is being introduced within the territory. These are, military and civil government. It is no inferior to that of the Indians around you, and you need also a territorial civil government. Congress has already supplied the first of these wants adequately and effectually. I doubt not that it will supply the other want during the coming winter. It must do this because our political system rejects alike anarchy and Executive absolutism. Nor do I doubt that the political society to be constituted here, first as a Territory, and ultimately as a State or many States, will prove a worthy constituency of the Republic. To doubt that it will be intelligent, virtuous, prosperous and enterprising is to doubt the experience of Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, and Holland and Belgium, and of New England and New York. Nor do I doubt that it will be forever true in its republican instincts and loyal to the American Union, for the inhabitants will be both mountaineers and seafaring men. I am not among those who apprehend infidelity to liberty and the Union in any quarter hereafter, but I am sure that if constancy and loyalty are to fail anywhere, the failure will not be in the States which approach nearest to the North Pole.

Fellow-Citizens, accept once more my thanks, from the heart of my heart, for kindnesses which can never be forgotten, and suffer me to leave you with a sincere and earnest farewell.

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